

Message Text

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ACTION NEA-10

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SP-02 EB-08 /061 W

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FM AMEMBASSY DACCA

TO SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 3698

INFO AMCONSUL CALCUTTA

AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD

AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI

C O N F I D E N T I A L DACCA 1067

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: SHUM, BG

SUBJ: STATUS REPORT ON THE BIHARIS

REF: STATE 039129

1. SUMMARY. MOST BIHARIS CONTINUE TO LIVE IN COLONIES, OR "CAMPS", BY THEIR OWN CHOICE. THE CAMPS EXIST BECAUSE THE BIHARI LEADERSHIP SEES THEM AS A POLITICAL LEVER IN THEIR CONTINUED QUEST FOR REPATRIATION TO PAKISTAN. LIVING CONDITIONS IN THE CAMPS CAN BE BAD, BUT NOT NECESSARILY WORSE THAN THE LIVING CONDITIONS OF POOR BENGALIS. MOST BIHARI MEN WORK OUTSIDE THE CAMPS. THE BDG HAS MADE SOME ATTEMPT TO RETURN PROPERTY TAKEN DURING AND AFTER THE LIBERATION WAR IN 1971. THERE IS NO POLICY OF OFFICIAL DISCRIMINATION, AND TO OUR KNOWLEDGE, THE PRESENT BDG HAS MADE NO STATEMENT REGARDING BIHARI REPATRIATION. THE PLIGHT OF THE BIHARIS, WHILE A CONTINUING SOCIAL PROBLEM FOR BENGALI SOCIETY, IS NOT AT THIS TIME AN ISSUE OF HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATION BY THE BDG. END SUMMARY.

2. BIHARI CAMPS AND LIVING CONDITIONS:

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A. MOST OF THE APPROXIMATELY 500,000 BIHARIS OF BANGLADESH CONTINUE TO LIVE IN CAMPS IN THE DACCA, RANGPUR, DINAJPUR, THAKURGAON, KHULNA AND CHITTAGONG AREAS. THE WORD "CAMPS", HOWEVER, TENDS TO GIVE AN INACCURATE IMPRESSION OF THE BIHARI LIVING AREAS. ORIGINALLY, AFTER PARTITION OF THE SUBCONTINENT IN 1947, THE NON-BENGALI MUSLIMS WHO CAME FROM BHAR AND OTHER AREAS OF NORTH INDIA

CLUSTERED IN COLONIES AND WERE ALLOTTED RATHER CHOICE AREAS (RELATIVELY SPEAKING) BY THE PAKISTAN GOVERNMENT. WITHIN THE ORIGINAL COLONIES IN 1971, SMALLER NUCLEI DEVELOPED AS THE BIHARIS RETREATED AND HUDDLED TOGETHER FOR THEIR GREATER PROTECTION. TODAY, THE BIHARIS CONTINUE TO LIVE IN THE ORIGINAL COLONIES BY CHOICE. THEY ALSO CONTINUE TO RESIDE IN THE INNER CAMPS, BUT IT IS NOT FROM OFFICIAL OR EVEN INFORMAL GOVERNMENT REQUIREMENT.

B. CONDITIONS IN THE LARGER BIHARI COLONIES CAN BE REASONABLY GOOD, WITH BRICK HOMES AND PAVED STREETS. WITHIN THE INNER CAMPS, LIVING CONDITIONS CAN BE WRETCHED, WITH WOMEN COOKING AND CHILDREN PLAYING AMIDST FILTH AND DEEP MUD FOR MOST OF THE YEAR. HOWEVER, SANITARY CONDITIONS IN THE INNER CAMPS ARE PERHAPS NO WORSE THAN THE DESPERATE CIRCUMSTANCES IN WHICH THE POOREST URBAN BENGALIS LIVE. THE INNER CAMPS CONTINUE TO EXIST MORE FOR POLITICAL THAN FOR SOCIAL/ECONOMIC REASONS. IN ORDER TO KEEP THEIR CAUSE ALIVE, BIHARI POLITICAL LEADERS, WHO RUN THE CAMPS THROUGH REPATRIATION COMMITTEES, INSIST THAT THE CAMPS CONTINUE AS RECOGNIZED ENTITIES AND THEREFORE REPORTEDLY OFTEN RESIST VOLUNTARY AGENCIES' ATTEMPTS TO IMPROVE CONDITIONS. FOR EACH CAMP, THERE IS ALSO A BDG RELIEF OFFICER WHO DEALS WITH THE COMMITTEE ON MATTERS SUCH AS FREE RATIONED FOOD PROVIDED OUT OF BDG STOCKS. IN THE LAST YEAR, FOOD HAS BEEN RELATIVELY PLENTIFUL IN DACCA AND ITS PRICE CHEAP, BUT THE FREE RATIONS CONTINUE, WE ARE TOLD, BECAUSE TO STOP THEM MIGHT BE TO CAUSE A POLITICAL UPROAR FROM THE REPATRIATION COMMITTEES.

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C. SEVERAL FOREIGN VOLUNTARY AGENCIES (VOLAGS) DO SOME WORK IN THE CAMPS. HEALTH, EDUCATION AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT (HEED), A CONSERVATIVELY-ORIENTED RELIGIOUS RELIEF ORGANIZATION BASED LARGELY IN THE U.K., HAS BUILT MANY THATCHED STRUCTURES AS TEMPORARY DWELLINGS, AND CONCERN, THE IRISH-BASED CATHOLIC ORGANIZATION, HAS ESTABLISHED BENGALI-MEDIUM SCHOOLS AND PROVIDED SOME MEDICAL FACILITIES. A LOCAL RELIEF ORGANIZATION, BANGLADESH VOLUNTARY SERVICES CORPORATION (BVS), USING MONEY MOSTLY FROM CATHOLIC RELIEF, HAS TAKEN OVER FROM CONCERN THE RUNNING OF THE SCHOOLS. THE INTERNATIONAL COMMITTEE OF THE RED CROSS (ICRC) HAS REPORTEDLY HAD NO CONTACT WITH THE CAMPS FOR MORE THAN A YEAR. WE ARE TOLD THAT THE VOLAGS HAVE BECOME SOMEWHAT EXASPERATED AND IRRITATED BY THE HIGHLY POLITICIZED REPATRIATION COMMITTEES, WHO CONTINUE TO INSIST ON THE RIGHT OF BIHARIS TO PAKISTANI CITIZENSHIP AND RESIDENCE AND WE APPEAR NOT TO HAVE THE LARGER SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC WELFARE OF THE BIHARIS IN MIND.

3. WORKING CONDITIONS FOR BIHARIS

A. THE MOST TALENTED, EDUCATED AND SKILLED BIHARIS MANAGED TO BE REPATRIATED TO PAKISTAN IN 1972 AND 1973. THOSE THAT REMAIN ARE GENERALLY THE LESS SKILLED. NEVER-THELESS, MOST WORKERS APPEAR TO HAVE JOBS OUTSIDE THE CAMPS. FEW HAVE BEEN ABLE TO RESUME POSITIONS THEY FORMERLY HELD. FOR EXAMPLE, THEY HAVE NOT BEEN TAKEN BACK INTO THE JUTE MILLS, WHERE THEY USED TO CONSTITUTE OVER HALF THE WORK FORCE. ALTHOUGH SOME BIHARIS HAVE BEEN ABLE TO RETURN TO THEIR JOBS ON THE RAILROADS, THE BEST THAT MOST CAN DO IS TO SERVE AS NIGHT GUARDS, PORTERS, RICKSHAW PULLERS OR BUS DRIVERS. WITHIN THEIR CAMPS, BIHARIS ARE INDUSTRIOUS; MANY OF THEM ARE SMALL SHOP KEEPERS SELLING TO EACH OTHER. BIHARI WOMEN OFTEN TAKE THE LEAD IN FOOD FOR WORK PROJECTS AND HAVE STARTED DOING HANDICRAFTS IN THE HOME. THE BIHARIS WHO PERHAPS HAVE SUFFERED MOST ARE FORMER LOWER-LEVEL GOVERNMENT WORKERS AND STUDENTS WHO WERE STUDYING

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IN URDU RATHER THAN BENGALI. FORMER BIHARI GOVERNMENT EMPLOYEES HAVE NOT RETURNED TO THEIR JOBS AND FORMER STUDENTS NOT FLUENT IN BENGALI CANNOT FIND SUITABLE EMPLOYMENT. WE UNDERSTAND THAT THERE IS, HOWEVER, ONE BIHARI SECTION OFFICER IN THE MINISTRY ON RELIEF AND REHABILITATION, MOHAMMED IBRAHAM, WHO WAS REINSTATED AS THE TOKEN BIHARI BY SHEIKH MUJIB. THERE APPARENTLY IS NO OFFICIAL DISCRIMINATION IN THE SEARCH FOR JOBS. ON THE SOCIAL LEVEL, CONSIDERABLE DISCRIMINATION EXISTS, BUT PARTLY IT IS DUE TO BIHARI SELF-IMPOSED CULTURAL ISOLATION.

4. BDG ATTITUDE

A. SINCE THE MARTIAL LAW ADMINISTRATION HAS COME TO POWER, THERE HAS BEEN SOME MINOR ATTEMPT TO RETURN PROPERTY TAKEN BY THE BDG UNDER THE MUJIB REGIME. ESSENTIALLY, HOWEVER, THE BDG LINE HAS BEEN CATEGORIZED BY LOCAL OBSERVERS AS "LET SLEEPING DOGS LIE." AS FAR AS WE CAN DETERMINE, THE MLA HAS NOT ISSUED A STATEMENT ON THE REPATRIATION OF BIHARIS. FOR POLITICAL REASONS, THE BDG WOULD RATHER NOT ATTEMPT TO RELOCATE CAMP DWELLERS. FOR ONE THING, BIHARI REPATRIATION COMMITTEES WOULD LIKELY PROTEST, SINCE THEY MIGHT LOSE THEIR INTERNATIONALLY RECOGNIZED ISSUE, I.E., SQUALID LIVING CONDITIONS. ON THE OTHER HAND, BENGALIS MIGHT OBJECT TO WHAT COULD APPEAR TO BE SPECIAL TREATMENT FOR A VERY SMALL MINORITY. THEREFORE, THE BDG DOES NOTHING, NEITHER HARASSING NOR HELPING THE BIHARIS.

B. THE BIHARIS ARE FREE TO TRAVEL THROUGHOUT BANGLADESH AND CAN OBTAIN PASSPORTS. SOME OF THE WEALTHIER ONES, WE ARE TOLD BY BIHARI CONTACTS, HAVE EVEN BEEN GRANTED THREE-MONTH VISAS BY THE PAKISTAN

GOVERNMENT IN ORDER TO VISIT RELATIVES. HOWEVER, ANY BIHARI WHO PREVIOUSLY APPLIED FOR REPATRIATION THEREBY FORFEITED HIS BANGLADESH CITIZENSHIP AND CANNOT NOW OBTAIN A PASSPORT. NOT ALL BIHARIS, IT MUST BE NOTED, APPLIED FOR REPATRIATION.

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5. CONCLUSION: AS THE BDG WISHES TO DEVELOP FRIENDLY RELATIONS WITH PAKISTAN, IT SEEMS UNLIKELY THAT AN OFFICIAL STATEMENT WILL BE MADE DEMANDING THAT PAKISTAN ACCEPT THE BIHARIS. NEVERTHELESS, THE BIHARI POLITICAL LEADERSHIP WILL CONTINUE TO PRESS THE ISSUE WHENEVER IT CAN. WHILE THE PLIGHT OF THE BIHARIS IS A SERIOUS SOCIAL AND ETHNIC PROBLEM FOR BENGALI SOCIETY, IT DOES NOT AT THIS TIME, IN OUR OPINION, CONSTITUTE A SYSTEMATIC VIOLATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS BY THE BDG.

MASTERS

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Message Attributes

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Control Number: n/a
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Decaption Date: 01-Jan-1960 12:00:00 am
Decaption Note:
Disposition Action: RELEASED
Disposition Approved on Date:
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Disposition Comment: 25 YEAR REVIEW
Disposition Date: 22 May 2009
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